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AUTHOR Kissam, Ed; Dorsey, Holda
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ABSTRACT

This module, which may be used as the basis for a workshop or as a special topic unit in adult basic education or English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) courses, discusses how and why to get involved in political and community life in the United States. Topics covered include the following: local political involvement, writing letters, reading the newspaper and writing letters to the editor, questioning politicians, voting, and becoming knowledgeable about public affairs. Basic skills addressed include communication skills, thinking skills, personal qualities, using resources, interpersonal skills, using information, and working with systems. The module contains the following: teaching points for the instructor; sample learning activities; a list of 12 resources; a sample lesson plan consisting of objectives, learners and context, room setup, materials needed, tasks to do ahead, media used, and steps for conducting the lesson; role-play materials; and pre- and postassessments. (KC)

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LAES
Latino Adult Education Services

Tierra de Oportunidad

MODULE 15

Civic Participation

Ed Kissam and Holda Dorsey

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE & HACIENDA LA PUENTE ADULT EDUCATION

15381 E. Proctor Avenue • Industry, CA 91745 • Ph: 818 855-3161 • Fax 818 855-3568
hdorsey@otan.dni.us

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MODULE 15
Civic Participation

Overview

Participating in the political life of the United States involves a great deal more than voting. Getting involved in community issues can have immediate, direct, and important impacts on adult learners' lives.

In many ways, talking with neighbors, participating in local action groups, writing letters, and speaking out at meetings may be as important as voting. It is not necessary to be a citizen to participate actively in politics. Politics is dialogue, speculation, expressing one's opinion -- interrelating with people in public forums. While only citizens can vote, anyone living in the United States can talk with others and join with others to pursue their interests.

To participate meaningfully in political life, it is necessary to be informed about the issues. Being informed means being in touch, learning about different points of view, listening well, reflecting on what one has heard, and thinking carefully about what one is going to say. Sometimes effective participation requires teamwork; sometimes it requires leadership. At other times, it requires simply a willingness to help out, taking free time to join with others to deal with common concerns.

The same skills brought to bear on political participation on issues of common concern to the community are an important part of workplace interactions and can be used by workers as part of strategies for career advancement. The ability to work smoothly and effectively as part of a team is more and more valuable in the U.S. (and the global) labor market.

Building adult learner's willingness and ability to participate meaningfully in the political life of their communities is a central strategy for engaging learners in ongoing use of English to build competencies in oral and written communication, and for expanding and deepening analytic skills, problem-solving skills, and experience in uniquely American modes of communication. Civic participation can also build adult learners' network of resources, preparedness for dealing with diversity, and self-confidence.

Civic participation involves not only political involvement, that is, in understanding, analyzing, and expressing one's opinion about different community options (in either a partisan or non-partisan context) but, also, active participation in community efforts to help others or improve community life. Such involvement as a volunteer in a non-profit charity, an organization dedicated to addressing

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problems in one area or another (e.g. immigrants' rights, low-income youth's career development, the environment), or even in an informal neighborhood clean-up campaign can help to improve community life for everyone. It can also be a way for a person interested in their community to get to know and learn to work collaboratively with their neighbors.

Basic Skills Development

The Political Participation module can be expected to have practical benefits in terms of building learners' knowledge and familiarity with this "tierra de oportunidad" and with the political and social framework of the specific community in which they live. The module is an "expandable" bundle of learning activities which can be focused narrowly or much more broadly depending on the group's interests and concerns.

The Political Participation module provides a structure in which an extremely wide range of SCANS-type skills can be integrated. The activities of this module are appropriate for any level of adult learners. The module can and may be adapted to learners' English language skills. For extremely limited English-language groups, most discussion, dialogue, and exercises should be in the native language.

Basic Skills:	basic civics -- distinction between civic involvement and partisan involvement, persuasive communication, participation in group discussion and decision-making, appropriate styles or "voices" for oral and written communication (letters to community leaders), negotiating, compromising, critiquing;
Thinking Skills:	analyzing rhetorical argumentation, extrapolating to assess the impacts of civic and political proposals, leadership to form ad hoc groups sharing a common interest, collaboration as part of a team to solve common problems, comparison of diverse and diverging points of view, synthesis of commonalties, directed questioning, active listening;

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Personal Qualities	using diverse perspectives to forge one's own point of view, recognizing responsibility for community environment and finding practical vehicles for participation, recognizing others' interests and one's responsibility to acknowledge and respond to them, assuming necessary tasks, appreciation of integrity in the face of social or economic pressure;
Uses Resources	using personal, print, and electronic information resources appropriately to secure strategic and tactical information, using the resources of personal networks sparingly but effectively, allocating resources within a team;
Interpersonal Skills	active questioning, active listening, working as a member of a team, seeking consensus in a group discussion, working effectively with people of diverse backgrounds;
Uses Information	acquiring and comparing information from diverse sources, summarizing, outlining, synthesizing, and critiquing;
Works With Systems	understanding the dynamics of local decision-making in local government and other non-governmental organizations, understanding formal and informal processes in civic affairs and government;
Uses Technology	using the World-wide Web to explore and compare diverse sources of news and information and analyze the relationship of style and content, awareness of media targeting to distinct audience segments;

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Teaching Points

1. **Political involvement can make a big difference** -- at least at the local level, and sometimes at the state and national level. Activists can make the biggest difference by focusing on the issues which most matter to them -- for example, children's education or affordable housing -- and concentrating on two or three of those issues.

2. **There are lots of ways to be involved in civic issues** but the most effective ways to be involved are to join or to create groups which address the issues important to one personally. Just talking about one's concerns is a beginning -- with family members, friends, and relatives. Neighborhood groups have gotten tremendous amounts done -- on everything from better emergency room care, to loans for small businesses, to the price of bus fares. People running for office are always grateful for help with their campaigns and they will listen more carefully to you if you have worked for them than if not.

3. **A community activist's voice or written letter is worth a hundred votes**. But in order to be heard and respected, a person must be genuine, direct, and reasonable. Being angry or disappointed with an elected representative or official is fine but be aware of points of view different than one's own and be calm and polite in explaining feelings or opinions.

4. **All public officials and their employees have the duty to listen to the constituents' concerns** courteously and to respond directly to them. Employees who do not respond courteously in a face-to-face or personal discussion should be reported to their supervisors. Elected officials who do not respond courteously in a face-to-face or personal discussion, even if they don't agree with you or do not respond to a letter you write, are not doing their jobs right and you should let others know.

5. **Reading the newspaper and writing letters to the editor is an important way to be involved in politics**. Even if only one out of ten of your letters are published, when it does appear it reaches tens or hundreds of thousands of newspaper readers. Writing a letter for publication in a newspaper or magazine works out best if a person writes several drafts, asks people he or she trusts to look at it, criticize it, and suggest how to make it better.

6. **It is important to reflect, analyze, and respond carefully to what politicians or people who want to be politicians say** and question it in one's own mind. . A key element in politics is for a politician to convince people to share their opinions or beliefs, whether or not this truly represents their opinion. Therefore, adult learners should be prepared both to question and, if their questions are satisfactorily answered, accept others' viewpoint.

7. **It is essential to join together on issues where it is possible to agree,** even if groups disagree on other issues because, in politics, numbers count. Different ethnic groups may have common problems and share similar concerns about some issues while differing on other issues.

8. **Immigrants who are permanent residents of the U.S. should consider the possibility of becoming a citizen** because otherwise they cannot vote and elected officials listen most carefully to people who are potential voters.

9. **Adults who become citizens should take the time to become informed about the candidates and to learn about the issues on the ballot** (even though the issues are often very confusing and complex). Otherwise, one might end up supporting a point of view that is really different than one's own.

Sample Learning Activities

The political participation module assumes that the first group activity will be to identify one or several issues of relatively high general interest. Sub-groups may be set up as "project" groups addressing a common interest or concern of the group participants.

The primary learning objectives are building learners' communication and higher-order thinking skills as they relate to a particular issue or issues being considered.

Classroom Discussion

1. Discuss people's differences of opinion on a key issue and focus on explaining why perspectives differ. Discuss whether class participants think there is one "right answer" for solving each issue or whether it is sometimes unclear what exactly to do.

2. Discussion of sources of power (position, money, information, access to media, effective self-expression). Where does power come from? Include examples of local figures who are powerful. What are the implications in terms of whether class participants can make a difference (e.g. by accessing information, expressing themselves).

3. Videotape a television news story on a controversial issue (preferably adults) and discuss with the class whether the story is fair, balanced, and complete. What information, if any, has been left out?

4. Read and discuss letters to the editor with attention to both the way in which the letter-writer expressed themselves and to their position on it.

5. Discuss the responsibilities of public officials in home countries and in the U.S. and to what extent public officials fulfill these expectations. If not, how does one know for certain-- i.e. distinguishing rumor from fact, information from mis-information.

6. Discuss whether class participants believe that public officials listen more carefully to people who can vote or who have donated to their campaigns than to other constituents?

Home Assignments

1. Discuss a high-priority issue with family members and/or neighbors and report back the extent they agree or disagree and why.

2. Draft a letter to an elected official or agency representative.

3. Review TV, radio, and newspaper coverage of an issue and report back the extent the coverage is all the same or different. If it differs, how and why?

4. Talk over a high priority issue with a group of neighbors and, if the group disagrees, attempt to resolve the differences of opinion. Describe if the attempt to resolve the differences of opinion worked or not, and why.

5. Take an informal poll of neighbors on a high-priority issue and (with the teacher's assistance) graph the results as a bar chart. (Follow-up with discussion of any patterns of response -- i.e. what sort of people had similar responses).

In-Class Group Activities

1. Based on oral discussion, list issues of concern on the blackboard and prioritize.

2. Based on reporting back or reading of written assignments, list individual points of view and synthesize (i.e. find the commonality).

3. Given an agreed-upon position on a solution to a common problem, list pros and cons and which sorts of groups care about the pros and which about the cons.

4. Role-play a meeting with an elected official or agency representative. Critique presentation by the constituent group and the elected official's response in terms of credibility and effectiveness. Repeat the role-playing to find a "better" solution.

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5. Role-play "targeting the swing vote" -- i.e. try to convince a person who is undecided on an issue to change their mind.

Group Projects

1. Draft a letter to an elected official or agency representative based on each individual group member's input or version of the letter.

2. Organize a community action group to address an issue of common concern and report back regularly to the class on its progress.

3. Plan, arrange, and conduct a visit to a community agency, political group, or public official to discuss an issue of interest and report back on how the meeting went -- including an assessment of how the group was treated.

4. Organize a "community forum" on a issue of common concern in the community.

5. Volunteer in a community agency or to work on a political campaign and report back to the class on the experience.

Sample Topics to Address in Political Participation Learning Activities

Some controversial issues or questions likely to be of interest to many adult communities in California which can be addressed meaningfully include the following:

- What should be done to improve adults' access to health care?
- What should be done to improve enforcement of current labor laws and regulations?
- What should be done to improve the educational experience and success of immigrant children?
- What should be done to decrease crime in urban areas?
- What should be done to decrease transportation barriers in accessing services in rural areas?
- What should be done to increase the availability of affordable housing?
- What should be done to counter discrimination?

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Resources Checklist

1. Newspaper and magazine articles in English and Spanish for comparison.

2. Videotaped segments of nightly newscasts.

3. Listing of local radio stations -- English or Spanish-language -- which have news or public affairs (particularly call-in shows).

4. California Ballot and Voters' Pamphlet -- most recent election.
   California Distance Learning Project - voters information
   www.otan.dni.us/cdlp/cdlp.html

5. Telephone book -- listing of addresses for public officials, county, state, and federal offices; and listing of civic organizations, public interest groups, and immigrant organizations.

6. Immigrant advocacy organizations, civic groups, and legal services paraprofessionals

7. Listing of local officials, agency representatives, etc. Contact local League of Women Voters to see if there is a local roster. Check white pages of local telephone book.

8. League of Women Voters pamphlets on attending public hearings, on testifying at a hearing, etc. (Contact local office for local materials. Samples attached for Sacramento County).

9. Profiles and biographies of active minorities.

10. Websites for leading newspapers (e.g. New York Times) television groups (e.g. CNN), also "issue-oriented" web sites (e.g. education issues, affordable housing). [Note URL's are not needed for these kinds of searches. Most Web Browsers will be able to retrieve many potentially interesting sites. You may want to try several different browsers to see how they differ -- e.g. Web Crawler, Yahoo!, Alta Vista, Lycos].

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A Sampler of News Web Sites for Browsing

Browser site - Lycos
http://www.lycos.com/
This was originally a browser site but it now hosts on its home page a variety of information services including a general news service. Like most other such sites, it has its own "editorial" character which students can compare to others.

Adult Education Resource - California Distance Learning Project
http://www.scoe.otan.dni.us/cdlp/cdlp.html
This California adult education site includes a collaborative project with CNN to provide adult learners with access to a story of the week -- in text and in video -- with "easy-reading" versions for use in adult education classes with low-literate students. This site also includes a collaborative voter involvement project with the California League of Women Voters.

News Central - California Newspapers
http://www.all-links.com/newscentral/northamerica/california.html
This site lists 188 California newspapers -- small local newspapers such as the Bodega Bay Navigator, large alternative newspapers such as the San Francisco Bay Guardian, and special-interest newsletters such as Ag-Alert (the agribusiness industry newsletter).

El Chicano
http://www.townnews.com/ca/chicano/
This is a southern California Chicano-oriented newspaper. located in San Bernardino. Interestingly, this now-commercial enterprise was begun (more than 25 years ago) by the University of California, Riverside to give a voice to the local Chicano community.

Los Angeles Times
http://www.latimes.com./HOME/
The Los Angeles Times is considered one of the five top U.S. newspapers "of record". Its print version has excellent coverage of issues of immigration policy and immigrant social policy.

The New York Times on the Web
http://www.nyt.com/
This is the home page for the Web-based version of the New York Times.

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Commercial ESL Textbooks

- Book of Forms, National Textbook Company
  Chapter 4, Government Applications and Forms

- ESL for Action, Addison Wesley
  Unit 8, Participating in a Union

- Essential Lifeskills Series: What You Need to Know About..., National Textbook Company
  Getting a Job & Filling Out Forms:
  Section 2, Filling Out Forms and Applications

- The ETC Program, A Competency-Based Reading/Writing Book, Book 6: Issues and Answers, Random House
  Chapter 3, Government and Law

- Rights and Responsibilities, Steck-Vaughn
  Chapter 3, At Long Last: Adulthood

- Strategies in Critical Thinking, Newspaper in Education
  Case Study 2, Was Ronald Reagan a Good President?
  Case Study 4, Who Votes for Whom in a Presidential Election? What Influences an Individual's Choice? Why?

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Date: _____

Student Name _____

Teacher Name _____

Student Survey
"Civic Participation"

Have you ever thought or talked with friends, co-workers or family members about the following issues:

	Please check the box that applies to you			
	Never	**Sometimes**	**Often**	**Not Interested**
a. how people can work together to make changes in schools, at work or in the community?				
b. what bothers you in the community and if or how it could be different?				
c. the different ways an individual can get other people interested in an issue or in changing laws or practices?				
d. whether it is worth it or not to tell local politicians, or the local community government representative your view or write a letter to a newspaper editor?				
e. how to get your ideas heard?				
f. whether or not there are local groups working on issues you care about?				
g. whether people who aren't citizens should have a say in community affairs?				

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2. How important is it for you to find out more about how to :

	For Each Line, Please check the box that applies to you			
	Not Very Important	**A Little Important**	**Very Important**	**Not Interested**
a. make a difference in the schools?				
b. work on a problem that bothers you in your community?				
c. let other people in the community know how you feel about an issue?				
d. find and join with the other people in your community who feel the way you do about an issue?				
e. analyze the issues that are reported on in the newspapers?				
f. convincing people who disagree with you to listen to your point of view?				

3. How confident are you that you have the skills you need to do the following:

	For Each Line, Please check the box that applies to you			
	Not Very Important	**A Little Important**	**Very Important**	**Not Interested**
a. write a letter to the editor of the newspaper expressing your views in a way others with different views would understand?				
b. listen to and communicate with public officials and their employees in a way which helps them understand your perspective and why it's different from theirs?				
c. get your voice heard through your Civic or community involvement?				
d. et access to a variety of information (or information from different sources) on community activities or government affairs, so you could really know what's going on?				
	For Each Line,			

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	Please check the box that applies to you			
	Not Very Important	A Little Important	Very Important	Not Interested
e. persuade others to pay attention to your viewpoint, when you think it's important?				
f. negotiate with others to solve problems or reach decisions, even when they are from various backgrounds and have differing perspectives which differ from yours?				

4. Crossing the street to come to class, your friend almost was hit by a car. There was a loud screeching of breaks, and the car was able to stop, but it was close. There is no stop sign on the street which would allow students to cross more safely; and this is the third time a student almost was hit.

a. What can you do about it?

_____

a. Whom would you talk to?

_____

a. What would you tell that person or persons?

_____

d. Will you get a stop sign there? Why or why not?

_____

5. What do you want to learn about how to make a difference in your community or getting local leaders to listen to the issues you think are important?

I want to learn:

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Date: _____

Student Name _____

Teacher Name _____

Module 15
Civic Participation

Instructions:
This activity is in two parts. The first part asks you to work in groups to choose an interest or concern, determine what to do about it, and either write a letter stating your group's view or enact a role play demonstrating your position. The second part asks you to reflect on the work you have done with this module and tell us what you learned from it.

Part I.
Divide into small groups. Then, please choose a common interest or concern to your group (such as neighborhood safety, local parks, schools, the need for good jobs, relations among different ethnic groups in your community, or something else). Then, please, either (a) write a letter about it to a politician or community leader, or (b) create a role play showing the group's position on the issue and how they could demonstrate their position to a community leader. Use the worksheet provided on the next page to draft your response (either the letter or the role play) and then turn it into the teacher.

If your group chooses to write a letter. Please draft a letter to a community leader or to a politician - local, state or federal. In order to get your point across, it is important that you clearly express your groups' position on the issue, write persuasively about it, include supporting information for your view, and that you list action or actions that the group would like the politician to take to show he or she has been responsive to your views. Use the space provided on the next page to draft your letter.

If your group chooses to prepare a role play. Please prepare a role play showing the group's position on the selected issue, and reflecting how the group could present this position persuasively to the community leader or politician (local, state or federal). Just like with the letter, it is important that your group clearly express your position on the issue, that you are persuasive in your presentation, that you include supporting information for your position, and that you recommend steps to be taken to show responsiveness to your views. It also is important that you represent the likely response to your group's views, and include in your role play a strategy for either overcoming (if you think the response will be negative) or building on that response (if you think the response may be positive or weakly positive). Use the space provided on the next page to script your role play.

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Civic Participation

Worksheet for Part I.—Please Turn This in to your Teacher

- We are drafting a ___ Letter ___ Role Play
- This is our issue:

_____

- Our group's position on it is:

_____

- We would like the politician or community leader to do:

_____

Draft of Letter or Role Play—Use the back of the page, I you need more space:

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Part II.
Please tell us what you learned from your work with this module

Did you benefit from your work on this module regarding any of the following?

Understanding better:	Yes/No	Please comment on either: • How you benefited; or • Why you feel this module was not useful for you in this area
a. How people can work together to make changes in schools, at work or in the community?		
b. How to let other people in the community know how you feel about an issue; and how to get your ideas heard?		
c. The different ways an individual can get other people interested in an issue or in changing laws or practices?		
d. If it is worth it or not to tell politicians, or local community government representatives your view or write letters to the newspaper editor?		
e. If there are local groups working on issues you care about?		

1. Did your work in this module help you in any of the following areas?

Understanding how to or how to better:	Yes/No	Please comment on either: • How you benefited; or • Why you feel this module was not useful for you in this area
a. Analyze the issues that are reported on in the newspapers or other media?		
a. Write a letter to the editor of the newspaper expressing your views in a way others with different views would understand?		
b. Listen to and communicate with public officials and their staff in a way which helps them understand your perspective and why it's different from theirs?		
d. Get access to a variety of information (or information from different sources) on community activities or government affairs, so you could really know what's going on?		
e. Persuade others to your viewpoint, when you think it's important?		
f. Negotiate with others to solve problems or reach decisions, even when they are from various backgrounds and have differing perspectives from yours?		
g. Anything else? Please tell us in the space below:		